FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
OCTOBER 27, 2002

TO MAKE A LIFE AND NOT JUST A LIVING
John M. Buchanan

The world is full of people who have attained what they wanted and are neither happy nor satisfied. Mere competence, or even excellence, in a chosen field of endeavor is an insufficient basis for success, for they do not take into account questions of worth, value, or merit. In short they fail the test of goodness, and certainly success cannot be said to be gained without some sense of the good of the thing at which one is successful. Thus, the mere making of money, or the gaining of power and influence, may be regarded as accomplishments, but whether the one who has gained these accomplishments can be regarded as successful in the moral, sense, is another matter.

Peter Gomes
The Good Life

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
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1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-40

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind . . . and your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 37:39 (NRSV)

Our lives are full, O God, full of obligations, commitments, responsibilities, things to do, and places to go. Our lives are full of things—our possessions, our treasures. And our lives are full of hope and fear, full of dreams and anxieties. In this time together, give us grace to let go of all of that and to listen quietly for your still small voice of calm. Startle us, O God, with your truth, and love, and grace: through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

There is an unforgettable scene in Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* Big Daddy, played in the movie by Burl Ives, and Brick, played by Paul Newman, retire to the basement to have a talk after a tumultuous and difficult family dinner. Brick, a promising and favored son, is not doing well at all. His life is a mess. He's drinking too much, carousing, not being responsible, and not being much of a husband to Maggie, his wife. Big Daddy is big, loud, demonstrative, larger than life. They're down in the basement to have a basic father-son talk about life and about how Brick is going to have to start living more responsibly. The basement is crammed with the accumulation of Big Daddy's life, a kind of personal museum: old furniture, lamps, pictures, luggage, souvenirs from all over the world, knickknacks that once seemed important and irresistible but now seem absurd—all of it stacked, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. Brick is struggling with the meaning of his life, looking for authenticity and purpose, and he looks around at this enormous accumulation of now useless stuff and asks a profoundly important question: "Big Daddy, why'd you buy all this junk?" And Big Daddy answers, "Because I wanted to live . . . because I wanted my life to amount to something." (See Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God,* p.116.)

There it is—the most basic human longing. "Why did you buy all this stuff?" "Because I wanted to live . . . wanted my life to amount to something."

Is the meaning of your life and mine really defined by the accumulated stuff in our basements, attics, closets? Condominium living, I have discovered, enforces a kind of economy on our accumulating tendencies. One of life's profound traumas occurs when those of us who used to live in houses with basements and attics and closets and garages for the overflow now have to fit it all in a small storage locker. In any event, it is the question, is it not? What's it all mean? What's it all about? Is it merely our individual junk collection?

I recall the comment of a bright senior high student in a youth group I was trying to lead years ago. It was in the 60s, and every youth curriculum in that volatile and difficult era was focusing

on the topic of life's purpose and living with integrity. One evening, after yet another uninspiring session, she said, "Reverend Buchanan, if we have one more discussion about the meaning of life, I'm afraid I'm gonna throw up. Can't we do something about it instead of sitting around eating pizza and talking about it?"

She had a point, and it's biblical, too. Life's meaning and purpose is, finally, a product of our behavior, not our ideas, or better said, our behavior growing out of ideas that are good and true.

Philosophy 101 taught us that from the beginning of time the question before the human race has always been "What is the good? What do I need to do or be in order to feel good? What can I do, in my lifetime, to ensure, at the end of the day, that I've done the right thing, lived up to my potential, lived it out as fully and meaningfully as possible?"

In Philosophy 101 we were also introduced to Aristotle, who said that the good is related to virtue: that if you can define what virtue is and then live it, you will be a good person—and also a happy person. That's also what the Bible says, by the way.

The problem is you and I live in a culture that has come up with an entirely different answer to the question of living a good life. It is a consumer culture, and we who live and worship here, between Bloomingdale's, Lord & Taylor, Marshall Field, Escada, Paul Stewart, Filene's Basement for the more ambitiously creative, know what that means, perhaps more clearly than anyone. The culture says exactly what Big Daddy told Brick: Your life's meaning is what you can afford to buy and consume. It is a culture given to glorious, sometimes hilarious excess. Harvard's Peter Gomes introduces his new book *The Good Life* by citing a *New York Times* Sunday Styles feature "Can a Kid Squeeze by on $320,000 a Month." It's about Lisa Bonder Kerkorian, a thirty-six-year-old former tennis pro who is demanding $320,000 a month in child support from her former husband, an eighty-four-year-old billionaire. Her demands include $14,000 per month for play dates and parties for their three-year-old child; $5,900 for eating out; $4,300 for eating in (*The Good Life,* p.1).

But Gomes, who is the minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, thinks we are in the midst of a serious reaction to the consumer excesses of recent decades. Speaking of the students he knows best, he writes:

> What has impressed me about these young people is not so much their intellectual ability but their moral curiosity, their desire to know, to be, and to do good. . . . Some time ago, young people decided they didn't want their father's Oldsmobile. . . . Young people want something better, they want a good life, true happiness, a chance to do something worth doing. They want to live their lives, and to offer them if necessary, for something worthy of sacrifice and service; and they want to live so as to leave the world a better place than the mess they have inherited. (p. 4)

And I thought when I read that, "Don't we all?"

In our heart of hearts, it is the question we all ask, maybe every single day of our lives, right up to the end. To whom or to what dare I give my ultimate loyalty, my deepest love, my full and total service. . . . What can I find and use to make a life and not just a living?" (p. 6)

A Pharisee, a religious official, a kind of lawyer whose job it was to teach and interpret the religious law, came to Jesus and posed the same question essentially: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" "What should we do to be good?" Religion has always focused on the good, the good life, and religion has always tried to define and prescribe it in terms of rules—mainly prohibitions, what you must avoid in order to be good. There were, as a matter of fact, 613 separate commandments, or rules, that constituted the law, the Torah. They covered all of life: what to eat, to wear, when to work and rest, how to raise children, how to farm, how to weave, slaughter animals, how to cook. There were so many rules that you could never be sure you weren't doing something wrong and violating one or another of them. It was so complicated that some people devoted their entire lives to exploring, struggling, discussing, interpreting the law. They were the Pharisees. And one of the questions they regularly asked was "Say you had to boil it all down to one overarching commandment, or concept, what would it be? Which is the greatest commandment?"

Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann says, "It was not a trick question. . . . It was rather like an endless Stanley Cup Playoffs—they asked him, as they asked each other, which commandment is first of all?"

Jesus answered correctly. Everyone knew what the answer should be. It's called the Shema. Devout Jews, for thousands of years, have been memorizing it, reciting it, wearing it around their wrists, around their forehead, nailing to their doorposts: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That's it; that's what you should do. "Love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength." They all nodded in agreement. Except he did not even pause—"There's a second," he said, "It's like the first one, in a manner of speaking it is what the first one means in practical terms: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"Wait a minute!" someone must have said. "Hold on! We only asked for one, not two." And he said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (See Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self.*)

Bruggemann observes that people are inclined always to affirm the first without the second, even God's own people. People sign on the covenant "I will be your God and you will be my people" without reading the fine print. Bruggemann says the uniqueness of Judaism and of Christianity is in the fine print and the fine print is about the other, not just the individual and God, not just the individual and God's law, but the individual and God and the individual and the neighbor. "You cannot in this tradition say God without saying 'neighbor'—it's almost hyphenated—"God–Neighbor." It's the major theme of the Bible, articulated most eloquently and simply in the First Epistle of John: "If a person says he loves God and hates his brother or sister, he is a liar."

Jesus forever changed the religious landscape when he combined God and neighbor in the Christian moral imperative. And the task of keeping them both present and in appropriate tension

has been and is the challenge. Love of God without love of neighbor becomes a kind of selfish spirituality—not relevant to the world, not very interesting, actually. Leave out the neighbor and religion has a way of becoming self-righteous, exclusive. I'm reminded of Mark Twain's observation about an acquaintance who was particularly pious: "He is a good man in the worst sense of the word." We know about loveless religion, the "graceless obedience" Brueggemann calls it, of the religious fundamentalist: Christian, Jewish, Muslim. We read with sadness in our hearts about the Nigerian woman, accused of adultery, sentenced to death by stoning by a fundamentalist Islamic tribunal, but not until her new baby is weaned.

Christianity is not immune. We have had our persecutions and burnings, our witch hunts and crusades. A fundamentalist preacher two weeks ago whipped his child in front of his congregation in defiance of a court order, to make a point, I suppose, about the love of Jesus and corporal punishment. Barbara Kingsolver's best-selling novel of a few years ago, *The Poisonwood Bible,* is about a fiercely fundamentalist minister, the Reverend Nathan Price, who takes his wife and four daughters to Africa to be a missionary, to bring the light of God's love in Jesus Christ to the indigenous people, but who is so loveless, so absolutely and arrogantly sure of himself and his theology, so clueless regarding the gospel's moral imperative about loving neighbors, that he manages to alienate the very people he is devoted to saving and loses his family in the process.

September 11, 2001, taught us the tragic potential of religion without grace, love, mercy, and kindness—other religions and own religion.

And leave God out of the question, and Christianity becomes just another scheme for personal improvement. Michael Lindvall, who just moved to the historic Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, in a new book writes that while our natural state is always to think of ourselves first, a radical self-orientation, to be a Christian is to reorient our focus, redirect it, consciously and intentionally, from self to God and to neighbor, God–neighbor.

Your neighbor, Jesus said, is the one who needs you. And that can be your literal next-door neighbor who is lonely or the person on the next street. It can be your family member, your child, mother, or father, who needs you in a new, poignant way these days. It can be your spouse or lover or friend. It can be global neighbors touched in small but important ways by the love of Jesus Christ living in the lives of his followers. Something like that is happening this week as a team of Fourth Church members helps build a church outside of Rio de Janeiro.

For us as a church it can be and is the people God has given us to love in Christ's name. The children, for instance, for whom this church is a safe haven, a place of security and love and affirmation—in our day care center and preschool and church school, but also the children from Cabrini-Green and throughout the city who don't have much by way of security and kindness in their lives, children who come here one of four nights a week for a nutritious meal, served with grace and care, and then an hour and a half with a tutor. Dr. Barry Brazelton, a Harvard child psychiatrist, worries about the thousands of urban children who are not going to make it because the clearest word spoken to them since birth is a word of negligence and violence, underfunded urban schools, little health care, and hunger, real hunger, in this land of affluence. It is a clear

word that says you are not wanted, you're not only not loved, you don't matter much; you are not, in fact, worth anything.

Well, once a week, some of those children hear a different word when they come to Fourth Presbyterian Church for tutoring. They hear that there are people who care about them—an individual tutor and a whole community of people called a church, a church of Jesus Christ, which in the name of their Lord is actually loving and serving neighbors. For some of those children, that alternative word, that love—will—as Jesus said it would—be life-giving and life-saving.

We have no lack of neighbors to love, no lack of opportunity to do what is good, and in the process we know the blessing of the good life defined by Jesus. Our neighbors include people who live in the neighborhood in high-rise condominiums and who are reminded daily by the presence of this church of the transcendent, the holy. And our neighbors include the homeless, the ones who sleep on the street and who beg for money, who struggle with addiction and health issues, and for whom this church and its Social Service Center are the only things in their lives resembling hospitality, kindness, and home. One of our guests, Archie, is here regularly. He is bright, cheerful, has bravely fought addiction and instability for years. Archie not only comes to the Social Service Center; he volunteers. He works in the kitchen every Sunday night at the Sunday Night Supper. During the week, he prepares lunches and talks to the guests. Archie's forty-eighth birthday occurred a while ago. Evan Farrar, the fine Director of our Social Service Center, found out about it and arranged a little surprise birthday party with a real cake and candles and a small gift. Archie was overwhelmed, to say the least. Through his tears, Archie told Evan that it was the first birthday celebration for many, many years.

Your belonging to this church, your prayerful support, your gifts, your money, are ways you and I are privileged to fulfill the commandment of Jesus to love God with heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves.

It is, I think, something of a second conversion, an intentional turning, first to God and then to our neighbor. And you know, as we do that, turn to our neighbor who needs us, we begin to address our deepest needs, our deepest yearning as human beings. In a particular but wonderful way, love given in the name of Jesus Christ circles back and blesses the giver. We are created for this. We are, someone said, wired for love. We yearn, Brueggemann says, to live in a neighborhood.

Jesus calls us to a life whose horizons are not confined to the contours of our own self but are expanded by the love of God; a life of love for neighbor; a life whose purpose and meaning are found in that love; a life, at the end of the day, that is good and full and joyful.

"What is the greatest commandment of all?" they asked, and he answered: "You shall love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Amen.